



The Inscription on the Cross of Christ

John 19: 19

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Variation. The inscription, which by decree of the Roman governor was placed over the Cross of Christ, is variously recorded in the four Gospels. Mark records it, "The King of the Jews" (Mark 15:26). Luke refers to the same inscription as, "This Is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:38). Matthew gives even a fuller record, saying, "This Is Jesus the King of the Jews" (Matt. 27:37). But it is left to John to give the fullest record, for he says, "Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews" (John 19:19). Now there is no contradiction in these accounts, even though many unthinking scholars have encountered difficulty at this point, for it is easy to see that the entire inscription was this: "This Is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews." As a matter of fact, the evangelists were not so much concerned with the exact and full statement of the inscription as they were the essence of that inscription as they remembered it. In the variations which appear is the stamp of authenticity and genuineness, showing that these men were not in collaboration with one another, but were presenting independent accounts of the same incident as they remembered it.

Translation. But besides the curious fact of variation, there is also the three languages in which this inscription was written. That in itself raises questions which deserve some answer, for it was the Roman governor who commanded that this inscription be so recorded.

The *Hebrew* language, which was the Aramaic in large part, was local in extent and religious in nature. This language was used in Palestine and comprised the vernacular of the people. It was the nearest to the old language of Israel and the language in which the Old Testament scrolls were written.

The *Latin* language was the language of the Empire and was therefore imperial and official. This was the language in which the business of the Empire was transacted, and it carried with it all the authority of Caesar and all the impact and might of the Roman Empire.

The *Greek* language, however, differed from the other two. Whereas the Hebrew was local and religious in nature and extent, and the Latin was imperial and official, the Greek was universal and cultural. It was the language of Alexander and his empire long since succeeded by the Roman Empire, but which still left its mark upon civilization. From the shores of India to the westernmost reaches of the Roman Empire this language had penetrated. And from north to south in the Empire this language had become the cultural and commercial medium of communication. It had become well-nigh the universal language of the then known world.

Signification. Before I speak more at length upon this matter let me call to your attention one other matter about this inscription. John refers to this as a "title" which is equivalent to the term "inscription," and marks the fact that this record was to give information. Both Mark and Luke refer to it as a "superscription" which indicates that this was an imposition upon the Cross for a purpose which is not stated in the word itself. But Matthew refers to this inscription as an "accusation." Therein lies the significance of that inscription.

It must never be forgotten that this person who was hanged upon that Cross was condemned as a criminal and given the sentence of a criminal although the governor himself was unable to find any fault with Him. Now even in that day, as well as this, there was a semblance of justice in the land. And where justice went astray, it was necessary to rationalize the situation. The riot in Ephesus during Paul's stay in that city occasioned no little concern to the Roman official because there

was no cause for the riot (Acts 19:40). Pilate was in no less dangerous position. Therefore, he ordered an inscription placed upon the Cross which would give information to the assembled multitudes of the crime of which this man was guilty. Concerning this accusation brought against our Lord, will you note the following five things?

I. This Accusation Was Universal in Its Extent

The universality of this accusation is indicated by the presence of the three languages in which the charge was inscribed. The racial and religious is indicated by the Hebrew language, the imperial and official by the Latin, and the cultural and commercial by the Greek, and thus the whole world had part in the accusation that was brought against Christ.

Hebrew. The Hebrew of the inscription was for the Jews who dwelt in Palestine and vicinity and who spoke the vernacular of the land. This accusation was their accusation, for they had cried out upon that fateful day "We will not have this man to reign over us; we have no king but Caesar. Away with him. Crucify him, crucify him." With this fact the average school boy is acquainted and asks for no further testimony in support of it.

Latin. The Latin of that inscription was doubly significant to Pilate, for he was the Roman representative in Jerusalem. He was the imperial and official dignitary in that section of the empire to promote the interests of Caesar. Even though he had found no fault with this crucified man, he was duty bound to preserve order and peace among the Jews, which thing he was unable to do on this occasion without satisfying their demand. The most plausible explanation to Rome would be the accusation, "King of the Jews." That would satisfy the hateful craving of the Jews, and it would save the face of Pilate himself.

Greek. Thus far the thinking of men follows in agreement. But it has been forgotten that that inscription was also in Greek. And the Greek carries the universal aspect which is too often overlooked. There was need for that in Greek. Jews had gathered in Jerusalem from the far-flung reaches of the Empire for the feast of the passover. Having been born and reared in lands beyond the seas where Hebrew was not spoken, and where Latin was not their vernacular, to them that inscription on the Cross would have meant nothing. And yet, it should mean something, for they were involved in that awful crime, and it was their cry that sent this spotless Son to the tree. Since the Greek language was universal, reaching every nook and cranny of the empire and even beyond, it was possible for every person there that day to witness understandingly to the accusation which they brought against the Christ. Furthermore, since this was universal in extent in that day, it is evidence, that were it possible for the whole world to have been there that day, the universal verdict would have been against the Christ.

II. This Accusation Was Spiritual in Its Intent

It must never be forgotten that this was the accusation that was brought against our blessed Lord and written on His Cross. And accusations always have moral intent. They indicate that something is wrong with the accused, and this thing is charged against him by the accuser; or they indicate that something is wrong with the accuser which causes him to bring false charge against the accused. Since Pilate is the one who authorized the inscription on the Cross, it is only to be expected that this accusation represents some conclusion to which he has come during his examination of Christ and the people. A careful study of a few verses in John 18 reveals several very interesting things.

Sovereignty. It will be noted that the charge brought against Christ by the Jews was that He claimed to be "The King of the Jews." For this reason Pilate confronts Him with this charge, "Art thou the King of the Jews" (John 18:33). To this, Christ replies by seeking information concerning the source of his knowledge. When Pilate sarcastically implies that he is not a Jew and must therefore get his information from the Jews, our Lord asserts that His kingdom is not of this world. If His kingdom were of this world the evidence would be overwhelming, for His servants would fight that He might not be delivered into the hands of the Jews. This elicits another question from Pilate, concerning His kingship, to which Christ gives positive answer: "Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world" (John 18:37).

In this statement our blessed Lord definitely confirms the charge that has been brought against Him. He is a king, exercising sway and enjoying sovereignty. His present status is that of sovereignty as indicated by the words, "That I am a king," which are better rendered, "Because I am a king." His sovereignty is consequent upon His incarnation, for He asserted, "To this end have I been born." And the permanence of this sovereignty is indicated by His statement that "for this cause I have come into the world." This meant to Pilate that Christ's sovereignty was a settled fact which would remain permanent and perpetual.

Sphere. But sovereignty is not all that is indicated by the accusation brought against Christ. For it is tacitly implied that when sovereignty is exercised, there must be a sphere in which it is exercised. The Lord did not leave Pilate in doubt as to this, for He declared to him that "for this cause came I into the world." Though there is a sense in which Christ exercises a kingship in the skies, this must never be confused with the thing that Christ declared here. Even though Christ's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, it is a kingdom that is operating in the realm of the world and consisting in every respect of men and women who walk and talk and live and work as men and women in the flesh. The source of this kingdom is not of this world. The subjects of this kingdom are not of this world. The spirituality of this kingdom is not like the world, but the sphere in which this dominion operates is the world. This made the ears of Pilate tingle, for the world is the place where the Herods, the Caesars, and the Pilates exercise their dominion. Surely this raised the question of subjects in his mind.

Subjects. Nor did Christ intend merely to raise the question of subjects in Pilate's mind. He also made clear declaration on this matter. His accusation charged Christ with the claim that He was merely the king of the Jews. But His sovereignty extended beyond that. His rule extended to everyone, so He said to Pilate: "Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice" (John 18:37). "Everyone"? That word is all-inclusive. That extends beyond the Jews to the nations of the earth. So far as Pilate was concerned, a local dominion operating in submission to Rome was no cause for alarm. But a dominion in the world that touched everyone constituted a threat to Rome, for the Roman Empire covered the then known world. So there is just a hint in the accusation that Pilate had inscribed on the Cross, that he is endeavoring to escape the inevitable significance of these words of Christ. Besides the inclusive nature of this statement, there is also the suggestion of the exclusive. Though this kingdom will include everyone, these will be those who are "of the truth."

Standard. In this statement we shall find the real reason for the rejection of Christ both by the Jews and Pilate. The Jews were not opposed to a king, most of all a king of their own flesh and blood. Nor were they opposed to a king who embodied in himself something of the supernatural. This was sufficiently demonstrated some few months before when Christ by miraculous power fed between five and ten thousand people. They were so enamored with the exploits of this unusual figure who appeared among them that they were about to take Him by force and make Him king. They would have if Christ had not miraculously conveyed Himself out of their midst (John 6:15). Nor were they opposed to a king who would rule the earth, for their hope was that some day a Messiah would come who would trample the nations under foot and make Israel the head of all. Their opposition lay much deeper than any of these things. In fact, the opposition of the world to Christ lies right here at this point. It lies in the spiritual standard of the king and His kingdom.



Only those who "are of the truth" will be subjects in the kingdom of our Lord, and they will hear His voice. Now truth is the standard, and Christ is the living embodiment of that standard. Anything that falls short of that standard is sinful. And they who are sinful refuse to hear His voice, to bow the knee in submission, to seek His mercy and His grace. When it became perfectly evident that this one who claimed to be the king of the Jews was intolerant of all evil and refused to grace a nation or the world with His kingship until they sought Him first as a saviour from their sins, then with deliberate, studied, and virulent hatred they planned His death even to the accusation which they brought against Him. In this superscription written above the Cross is the carefully planned effort of the Jews to cover up their crime by camouflage of plausible words. They were not against Him because He claimed to be a supernatural sovereign, but because He claimed to be a sinless, supernatural sovereign, insisting that His subjects must seek Him first as a saviour from their sins. The accusation was designed to hide the truth. But Pilate felt the significance of those words even if he did not see through them. For he wrote those words on the Cross, not as the claim of the Crucified One, but as the truth. And he refused to change them when the Jews assailed him (John 19:21, 22).

III. This Accusation Was Truthful in Its Content

The expositor of the word would be short-sighted indeed were he to stop at this point in the explanation of this inscription. For the witnesses to this inscription proclaim loudly that it was truthful in content. So note here the fact that this accusation was founded upon the truth, speaking definitely of the historical person, referring clearly to His Messianic office, and pointing unmistakably to His essential nature.

Historical. The historical person is clearly designated by the words, "This is Jesus of Nazareth." "Jesus" is the name which was given to Him at birth, and Nazareth is the place where He spent the first thirty years of His life. He was known far and wide by these two expressions. His parents always called him "Jesus." His brothers and sisters always referred to Him by this name. The townspeople knew Him by this common name "Jesus." In the outlying villages and countryside He was known by the same name. After beginning His public ministry He was still known by this name, and the people up and down the land came to know Him by the name "Jesus." When they asked the location of His home they always received the reply, "Nazareth." When Philip announced his find to Nathaniel, he said, "We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). The many thousands of Jews who were at this passover and knew this Jesus could nod their heads in assent as they read that much of the inscription on the Cross. For that was true. This was Jesus of Nazareth.

Messianic. But His Messianic office was also included in this inscription in these words, "The King of the Jews." Long centuries before it had been prophesied that He would sit upon the throne of David (Isa. 9:6, 7). And repeatedly from that day the essence of that prophecy was written into other Old

Testament books. Even during the centuries when the voice of prophecy was still, from Malachi to John the Baptist, the intense longing for this coming Messiah in Israel was passed from lip to lip, and from heart to heart. When John the Baptist appeared upon the scene his message that "the kingdom of Heaven is at hand" met with immediate reception. The angel made it clear to Mary that her son would sit upon the throne of His father David. Upon beginning His public ministry Nathaniel ascribed to Him immediately His proper title when he said, "Thou art the King of Israel" (John 1:49). From time to time throughout the three and one half years of ministry the people caught faint glimpses of His kingly qualities and wished to make Him king. On that last memorable visit to Jerusalem, just a few days before this awful event, the crowds saw Him as they had never seen Him before, riding in royal state into the city of His love, and uncontrollable thought and passion seized them, and they vented it in deep-throated praise, "Hosanna: Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord" (John 12:13). Surely no one can read this accusation today without affirming that this part of the inscription was also true.

Essential. His essential nature and purpose is the final aspect of the inscription, and this also was true. This is not obvious to an English reader, nor to any reader who does not know the Hebrew language. But it was obvious to everyone who could read that inscription in Hebrew, for it was written in Hebrew. There was the name of Jesus in the original. "Joshua" was that name in Hebrew. And the name "Joshua" is a combination of two Hebrew words, the word "Jehovah" and the word "save." And the two together mean "Jehovah saves." This is the name that Mary was instructed to give her son, "For he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). No one less than Jehovah Himself could redeem His people from their sins. From the first this Jesus laid claim to deity, claiming that He was the great "I AM." That is just another way of saying Jehovah. Repeatedly He barely escaped with His life when they sought to stone Him for such claims. But there were some who recognized Him as Jehovah. His apostles recognized Him and addressed Him as Lord. The woman taken in adultery recognized Him and spoke His title in confession. The blind man whose sight was restored addressed Him in this way. Mary and Martha did not hesitate to call Him Lord. And on the fateful day of crucifixion a dying thief saw Him as Jehovah and begged for His salvation. This, too, is true and has been received by countless millions since then to the salvation of their souls.

Since this accusation is true, not in part, but the whole, there is in it a portent, a prophecy, a promise, a pledge for the future. This truth has not yet been realized, and so as certainly as the future must come, so must this truth be realized in the earth.

IV. This Accusation Was Guaranteed by the Event

This accusation was guaranteed by the Cross, for in the Cross of Christ there was protection for the name of Jehovah, there was preservation of the moral order in the universe, and there was provision of a spiritual basis for the mediatorial kingdom. Apart from this central fact the accusation would have been false, as the Jews maintained, and at most it would have been sheer folly.

Name Jehovah. The name of Jehovah was protected by the work of the Cross. When the disciples besought Christ to teach them to pray, He granted their request and began this way, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name" (Matt. 6:9). No matter how well known this prayer may be, few note the fact that the first petition is, "Hallowed be thy name." We are not certain how long this prayer had been known by the disciples before Calvary. But one thing is certain, and that is this, that every time that prayer was prayed, it was a prayer for Calvary. That petition means, "Let thy name be sanctified," or "Set thy name apart from sin once and for all." This Christ did at the Cross. This settled the matter once and for all, whether the name of Jehovah was to be dragged into sin, and whether men would think of Him as a sinful God like to the men over whom He ruled. Pagan religions stand in contrast with the Christian religion in this one respect. Their gods are simply like the men whom they rule. They are sinful. But at Calvary God settled the matter once and for all, so far as His name is concerned. Nothing short of an infinite sacrifice in the person of Jehovah Himself was sufficient to set His name apart from sin.

Moral order. Besides the protection for the name of Jehovah, the moral order of the universe was preserved. Since the universe grows out of the one who creates it, it will be expected that it will be like the one who does the creating. And He who created must also preserve and sustain and govern His universe. Holiness, the chief attribute of Jehovah, is the quality that holds every other virtue of God in order and makes it certain how every attribute will function. The same quality in God makes it certain how men and nations, angels and cherubim will function. Mysteriously sin entered this universe and the human race, and introduced confusion and uncertainty and chaos and disorder and destruction and death wherever it has gone. Four thousand years of sin and more had wrought its worst among the nations of men, and nothing but the debris and destruction and dirge of an endless funeral train was to be seen, with discouragement and despair for the generations living and those yet unborn. But there was a Cross and a Christ upon that Cross, and Jehovah settling once for all the matter of His universe. There Jehovah made it plain that His universe was moral at heart, that all sin will be judged, and that holiness was guarding and guiding and will yet triumph in the affairs of men.

Kingdom basis. In the third place, the spiritual basis for a future kingdom was provided at the Cross. The second petition of the prayer which Jesus taught His disciples was "Thy kingdom come." This is the kingdom which was prophesied of old. It is the kingdom for which the patriarchs looked and the people longed. It is the kingdom which John the Baptist and Jesus announced. It is the kingdom of which the princes and priests boasted and about which they knew so little. In their minds race, power, military prowess, military pomp, and political prestige had eclipsed the weightier matters of spiritual life and godliness. Worst of all, they had completely overlooked the fact that no kingdom will stand which is established on sin and sinful nature. These were the matters which no less an expositor of the Old Testament than Nicodemus overlooked. It took Christ to tell him that he needed to be born again. Then when Nicodemus desired to know the process for new birth, again Christ had to remind him that the basis for that was the Cross and the appropriation of the Cross by faith. Now Christ is on the Cross, actually performing and fulfilling the very prediction He had made to Nicodemus three years before. There on the Cross He is laying the foundation for the words which constitute the charge against Him. He is laying the foundation for a spiritual society that bows the knee to the king and who live in righteousness with one another and with God.

In the work of the Cross there is the guarantee that the accusation of the Cross will yet be fulfilled among the sons of men. After the supreme price of the Cross, the king and His kingdom must come.

V. This Accusation was Prophetic in Its Portent

That this accusation was prophetic of the future is evident and must be the conclusion after noting the truth of that accusation and the guarantee in the crucifixion. But it may still be questioned whether others were able to see that fact that day. And it may be confidently affirmed that they did.

Jews' madness. The Jews cringed before the accusation upon the Cross. "Then said the chief priests of the Jews to

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Pilate, Write not, The King of the Jews; but that he said, I am King of the Jews" (John 19:21). The scene is graphic and more graphically depicted in the original. John makes it clear that the placing of that title over the Cross in three languages was the specific reason for this action on the part of the Jews. "Then," or as it is more accurately rendered into the English by the Revisers, "Therefore." So baffled and beaten are they to see the very thing now published abroad which they had sought to escape, that time and again they attempted to persuade Pilate to change the writing. "Therefore they kept on saying" to Pilate is the way the Greek puts it. The way they wanted the writing changed is also interesting. They wanted Pilate to write it as the claim of Jesus. But they even wanted that changed. The definite article before "King" they wanted removed, for it spoke of Christ as the one and only king of His kind. As the inscription stood, it was truth with the seal of the Roman government upon it. Probably God knows what fear coursed through the bodies of those brutal and maddened priests as they read those words of truth. Here was truth written boldly and irrevocably, and prophetically announcing the failure of maddened men, the doom of human kingdoms, and the fulfillment of the Kingdom of the Heavens.

Pilate's sadness. The Roman procurator refused to change what he had written. How long Pilate endured the incessant pestering of those Jewish priests it is impossible to tell from the text. But when he finally spoke, he did so with decision and definiteness. And he did it with few words. Three words in the original tell all that he said. Those words present the fearful conclusion to which Pilate had arrived and from which he had sought to escape. But they were true. This was the King of the Jews. And now that he had failed to escape the conniving machinations of the Jews, he determined at the last moment to write the truth in spite of them. And he did write the truth. Now incensed by the Jews who were plaguing him, new courage grips him, and he determines never to change that writing. It would remain permanent. "What I have written, I have written." The seal of Rome is upon it, and it cannot be changed.

Thief's gladness. But there was another there that day who took even a different attitude toward that accusation than the two we have just mentioned. That was the penitent thief. Although at first those words were nothing more to him than an occasion for mockery, later something happened. In the presence of this unusual criminal, those words lost their lightness. He studied them. They changed. With new insight he began to see that they fitted the individual against whom they were charged. By faith he tested their accuracy and said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me whom thou comest into thy kingdom" (Luke 23:42). His faith was instantly rewarded, for the one whom he had addressed turned and addressed him, and like a king made promise and prophecy far beyond the expectations of that thief. "Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). That was all that was said. But it was sufficient to record for future generations to read. What the thief saw there that day has helped countless others to see the prophecy in those words on the Cross.

Jews in their madness, a Roman in his sadness, and a thief in gladness saw the prophetic truth in those words. Those words are not changed to this day, and will never be changed now, for they have become a part of God's holy and unchangeable Word. It only remains for the time that God has placed in His eternal counsels for those words to come true. As the shadows lengthen across man's little day, there rises before us a Cross on which is inscribed, "This is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews." The shades of night are even now upon us, and soon it will be midnight. Then comes the dawn.